

HELEN KELLER
by
Van Wyck Brooks

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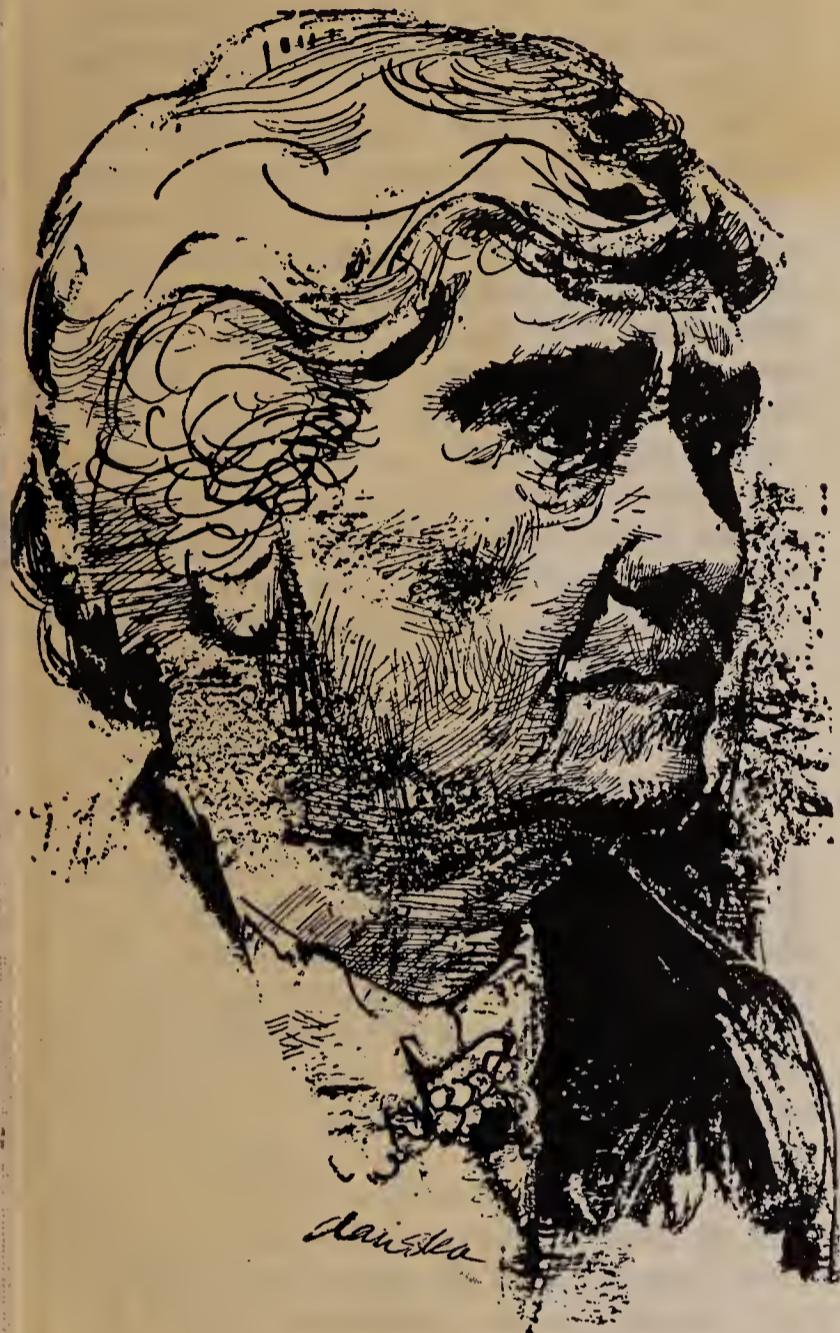


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Helen Keller

Van Wyck Brooks



WHEN I was in St. Augustine, Florida, in the winter of 1932, Helen Keller appeared at the Cathedral Lyceum, and I went to see and hear her there, drawn by curiosity, such as one feels for any world-famous person. For Helen Keller was not only famous but she had been so from the age of ten, when she had sat on Edward Everett Hale's knee and Queen Victoria asked Phillips Brooks about her. A ship was named after her in 1890, and, while Oliver Wendell Holmes had published a letter of hers in one of his books, she had visited Whittier in his house on the Merrimac river. President Grover Cleveland had received her in the White House, as other presidents were to do in after years, and Mark Twain had said that the two most interesting characters of the nineteenth century were, quite simply, Na-

oleon and Helen Keller. Yet there she was in St. Augustine, still young, in 1932, and here she continues to be twenty-two years later.

I remember one phrase she uttered then, interpreted by her companion (for, never having heard her own voice, her speech was turbid): a phrase referring to the subway in New York that "opened its jaws like a great beast," which struck me at the moment as reminiscent of the prophets in the Bible. I was not aware then how steeped she was in the language of the Bible, which I later heard her expound with Biblical scholars; nor did I know how familiar she was, literally, with the jaws of beasts, for she had once stroked a lion's mouth. The lion, it is true, was young and well fed in advance, but nevertheless she entered its cage boldly; for her "teacher," as she always called Anne Sullivan, the extraordinary woman who developed her mind, wished her to meet experiences of every sort.

The daughter of a Confederate officer, Miss Keller was born on an Alabama farm and knew cows, mules, and horses from her earliest childhood; they had eaten apples from her hand and never harmed her; and her teacher, feeling that she should know wild animals as well, introduced her early to the zoo of a circus. She shook hands with a bear, she patted a leopard, she was lifted up to feel the ears of a giraffe. She encouraged elephants to wind their trunks about her neck and big snakes wrapped their coils about her, so that Helen Keller, for this reason partly, grew up without fear, and she has remained both physically and morally fearless. The only animals she has not touched are the panther and the tiger, for the tiger is "wanton," as I once heard her say, an appropriate word but characteristic of a mind that has been fed from books instead of the give-and-take of everyday talk.

HELEN KELLER

At that time I knew little of Helen Keller's life and mind, and I could not have guessed that a few years later I was to be her neighbor, seeing her often. My old friend the sculptor Jo Davidson brought us together, just as her own feeling for sculpture had drawn her to Jo Davidson, because Helen Keller "saw" with her hands. She has "ten eyes for sculpture," as Professor Gaetano Salvemini said when, in 1950, she visited Florence, and he arranged for her to see Michelangelo's Medici tombs and the sculpture of Donatello in the Bargello. Salvemini had movable scaffolds set up so that she could pass her hands over the Medici heads and St. John the Baptist, the figures of Night and Day and the Madonna and Child; and our friend Jo, who was present, said he had never seen these sculptures before as when he watched her hands wandering over the forms. She peered as it were into every crevice and the subtlest modulations, exclaiming with pleasure as she divined the open mouth of the singing youth and murmuring over the suckling infant, "Innocent greed!" She had quoted in *The World I Live In* a saying of Ghiberti about some sculptured figure he had seen in Rome, that "its most exquisite beauties could not be discovered by the sight but only by the touch of the hand passed over it." To how much else and to how many others her "seeing hand" has led her first or last! It has been her passport to the world outside her.

FOR the world in which she lives herself is built of touch-sensations, devoid of physical color and devoid of sound, and she has written much about the hand by which she lives and which takes the place of the hearing and sight of others. Exploring the faces of her friends and people whom she has just met, she reads them as if she were clairvoyant, and she can distinguish the Yankee twang and the Southern drawl she has never heard by touching two or three spots on the throats of the speakers.

She says that hands are quite as easy to recognize as faces and reveal the secrets of the character more openly, in fact, and she can tell from hands at once whether people have large natures or whether they have only "dormouse valor." In the soft smooth roundness of certain hands, especially of the rich who have never known toil, she feels a certain chaos of the undeveloped; and, in her land of

darkness and silence, she can feel with her own hands the beautiful, the strong, the weak, the comic.

She had early learned geography from maps that her teacher made out of clay or sand on the banks of the Tennessee river, feeling mountains and valleys and following the course of other rivers, and she relates in *The Story of My Life* how, in 1893, she virtually saw with her fingers the World's Fair in Chicago. It is true that the inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, one of her early admirers, was there with her and described to her some of the sights in the deaf-and-dumb "system," but he had arranged for her to touch all the objects in the bazaars, the relics of ancient Mexico, the Viking ship. She had taken in with her finger tips the Arabian Nights of the fair as she had learned to read from the raised letters of Braille.

IT is natural that Helen Keller has dwelt at length in her books on the hand by which alone the blind are able to see. She very early dedicated her own life to the cause of the education of the blind—doubly handicapped as she was and the only one so handicapped who has ever become a thoroughly well-educated person. (The only possible exception is Robert Smithdas, who graduated from St. John's University in 1952.) Because she was handicapped, because two of her senses were cut off, nature augmented her three remaining senses, not the sense of touch alone but the sense of taste and the sense of smell, which others regard, she says, as a "fallen angel."

In her these are all exceptionally acute and alert. She tells in her *Journal* how in London, passing through a gate, she knew at once by the smell of burning leaves, with the smell of the grass, that she was in Green Park, and she says she can always distinguish Fifth Avenue from humbler New York streets by the odors issuing from the doors as she walks past. She knows the cosmetics that women are using and the kind of coffee they are roasting within and whether they use candles and burn soft coal or wood, just as she recognized St. Louis from the smell of the breweries miles away and Peoria from the smell of the whisky stills. "Listening" with her feet, she says, in a hotel dining-room, she knows the moods and characters of people who walk past her, whether

they are firm or indecisive, active or lazy, careless, timid, weary, angry, or sad; and she will exclaim, "What lovely white lilacs!", knowing they are white by touch or smell, for in texture and perfume white lilacs differ from purple. Sometimes, hearing her say these things, I have thought of Edward Sheldon, my blind friend who remarked to Cornelia Otis Skinner, "Your hair is dark, isn't it? I can tell from your voice." Helen Keller, who cannot hear voices, feels vibrations. When an orchestra plays, she follows the music waves along the floor; and, detecting on her desk upstairs the vibration of the bell from the pantry below, she answers with a shuffle of the feet, "Coming down!"

All this gave rise in early years to legends of a "wonder girl" that always annoyed Helen Keller—for she is the embodiment of humor and simple good sense—as well as to rumors in Europe that she was the last word in "American bluff," which led to various efforts to discredit and expose her. The girl who had "found the Blue Bird," as Maeterlinck put it, was said never to be tired or discouraged or sad, and all sorts of supernatural faculties were attributed to her, especially the gift of making uncanny predictions.

BUT, while Anne Sullivan took pains to keep her from being a prodigy, and no one found anything to expose, it was impossible to conceal the fact that she had a remarkable mind and even perhaps a still more remarkable will. Speaking of this, Emma Goldman said she proved that the human will had "an almost illimitable power"; and what could one say of an intellect as handicapped as hers that, at eighteen, carried her so far in so many directions? If she did not master, she learned much of geometry, algebra, physics, with botany, zoology, and the philosophy that she knew well, while she wrote good letters in French, as later she spoke German, reading Latin too when she went to college. Unable to hear lectures or take notes, she graduated with honors at Radcliffe, where she wrote her autobiography in the class of Mr. Copeland, the famous "Copey" who said she showed that she could write better, in some of her work, than any other man or woman he had had as a pupil.

It was Anne Sullivan who had invented the methods of connecting mind with mind that

made all this possible, of course—and that seemed to be "superhuman," as Einstein remarked; although Helen all but outstripped her perceptive teacher and retained all that she took in. Few of the required books were printed for the blind, and she had to have whole books spelled into her hand, while, always examining, observing, reflecting, surrounded by darkness and silence, she wrote that she found music and brightness within. Through all her thoughts flashed what she supposed was color. With her native traits of pluck and courage, energy, tenacity, she was tough-minded and independent also, and her only fear was of writing something that she had been told or that she had read, something that was not out of her own life and mind.

II

THIS was the girl who had evolved from the headstrong child whom Anne Sullivan had found in Alabama and whom she had taken at the age of eight to the Perkins Institution in Boston where Helen afterward visited off and on. There she encountered Laura Bridgman, the first deaf-and-dumb person who had ever been taught to communicate with her fellow-creatures, Dr. Howe's celebrated pupil whom Dickens had written about and who was a contrast indeed to the "young colt" Helen. Laura Bridgman was shocked, in fact, by her impulsive movements and rebuked her for being too forward, robust as she was, while the statue-like motionless Laura, with her cool hands, struck Helen as like a flower that has grown in the shade.

A much more interesting personality, and ruddily healthy from the start, Helen herself was to grow up fond of sports, riding a horse and a bicycle tandem, playing cards and chess and all but completely self-reliant. Moreover, she was never guarded from the knowledge of evil, and, fully informed as she always was about the seamy sides of life, the mind that she developed was realistic. Nothing could have been more tonic than Helen Keller's bringing up, under the guidance of Anne Sullivan, on the farm in Alabama. They read and studied out of doors on the riverbank, in the woods, in the fields, in the shade, as Helen remembered, of a wild tulip tree, and the fragrance of the mimosa blossoms, the pine needles, and the grapes were blended

HELEN KELLER

with all her early lessons. She learned about the sun and rain, and how birds build their nests, about squirrels, frogs, wild flowers, rabbits, and insects; and, as it came back to her, everything that sang or bloomed, buzzed or hummed was part of her education.

It might have been supposed, meanwhile, that the Perkins Institution also influenced Helen in various ways, for she carried through life what seemed to be the stamp of the reformist mind that the great Dr. Howe represented. An old Yankee abolitionist, Samuel Gridley Howe was concerned for all the desolate and all the oppressed, and Helen has written with the same indignation and grief about lynching and anti-Semitism and the case of Sacco and Vanzetti. Usually on the unpopular side, and for years a follower of Debs, she was almost a social outcast in certain circles when Mark Twain, who hated injustice—and was a special friend of hers—said there were worse things than being blind. It was worse to have eyes and not to see. Helen liked Mark Twain all the better because, as she wrote in *Midstream*, he did not temper his words to suit feminine ears, because "his talk was fragrant with tobacco and flamboyant with profanity," while, with his tender heart, he matched her tough mind. It pleased her when, bidding her good night, he said she would find in the bathroom not only Bourbon and Scotch but plenty of cigars.

HELEN'S realism, along with her social imagination, developed in her the planetary mind, so that on her tours to help the blind in all the six continents she has read in every country the signs of the times. With an outlook that was molded more or less by Emerson and Whitman, along with the New Church doctrines that are her religion—for she was early convinced by Swedenborg's writings—she has become a world citizen who stands for the real America that public men so often misrepresent. She has understood Japan and Greece and especially perhaps the Bible lands, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, where she has lectured at universities from Cairo to Jerusalem and where new schools for the blind have risen as she passed. Reaching out to meet the minds of all sorts and conditions of men, she comprehends their needs and aspirations, so that she is a true spokesman of our multiracial country

that is already a vestibule of the coming "one world."

III

NOW it happens that, living myself in Connecticut, not far from Helen Keller, I have taken a few notes about her in recent years, jotting down chance remarks of hers and other memoranda, comments that from time to time she has suggested. I offer some of these, unconnected as they are, as follows:

July 1945

Helen has been out picking blueberries today. She has only to touch them to know when they are ripe.

The paths and garden at her house are all so perfectly kept that I exclaimed over them. Helen does it. In summer she is up at five every morning, edging the driveway and the paths. She asks Herbert [Herbert Haas, who drives the car and runs the house] what she should do next. Then she weeds the flower beds. She distinguishes by touch between the flowers and the weeds.

Helen comes to dinner, bringing her checkerboard for a little game.

I had happened on a poem "To Helen Keller" by Edmund Clarence Stedman, published in 1888, fifty-seven years ago. Richard Watson Gilder also addressed a poem to her, and both these poets had written sonnets and odes to Lincoln at the time of his death. Now, halfway through another century, Helen looks at times, and even very often, like a young girl. How many poems were written to her by Robert Frost and others in the good old days when poetry was still "public."

Dinner with Helen and Salvemini at Professor Robert Pfeiffer's. Our Florentine hostess Mrs. Pfeiffer played an Italian song. Helen stood by with her left hand on the piano top, waving her right hand, keeping time. In this way she knows by heart Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" and recognizes many other compositions.

Someone asked her how she tells the difference between day and night. "Oh," she said, "in the day the air is lighter, odors are lighter, and there is more motion and more vibration in the atmosphere. At night there is less vibration; the air is dense and one feels less motion in things."

With Helen and Polly Thomson [Anne Sullivan's successor] in New York, at a small political meeting in the Hotel Astor. Maury

HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Maverick was with us, just back from England, marveling over the work of the English surgeons in the war. Vice-President Truman had come up from Washington to make a short speech, and we were all introduced to him. Later Helen said, "He has an open hand. There are no crooks in his fingers." She grasps character instantly. Truman was deeply touched by Helen. He was in tears when she spoke to him.

September 1945

Today, more than usually, an air of Scotland pervades Helen's house. In the first place, it is called Arcan Ridge after an old farmhouse in the Scottish Highlands, and Polly Thomson, who has been with Helen since 1914, speaks with a livelier than ever Scottish accent. But this evening William Allan Neilson comes to dinner, the president of Smith College who was one of Helen's professors at Radcliffe and learned the manual alphabet to talk with her there. (He was one of my old professors at Harvard too, and now he is the only person living who, meeting me, aged sixty, invariably addresses me as "Boy.") Neilson still speaks broad Scots, almost every word with "hair on it," as Rudolph Ruzicka said of another Scotsman.

After dinner the talk fell on Scottish songs. Helen went upstairs to her study—for she knows her way perfectly about the house—and brought down a two-volume collection of Scottish songs in Braille which the publishers in Edinburgh had sent her. She read the table of contents with her fingers rapidly, found a song she wanted, turned the pages and read it out to us—a Highland "wail from Skye," as Polly put it.

With Helen and Polly to the harvest festival at the Jewish Theological Seminary far uptown in New York. Midday meal in the Sukkah, the festival tent set up in the quadrangle. The walls were hung with all the fruits of the season, or all the fruits of the Holy Land that are mentioned in the Bible. We sat with the president of the Seminary, Dr. Louis Finkelstein, and the famous Hebrew scholar, Dr. Saul Lieberman. For a moment I thought of the New Testament scene in the Temple at Jerusalem, for Helen surprised these great Jewish doctors with her knowledge of the Bible. I remembered what she wrote in *Midstream*: she had read her Braille Bible so often that in many places the dots had been rubbed off.

Listening to the Hebrew grace with her fingers on Dr. Finkelstein's lips, she said, "It is like the voice of the Lord upon many waters, the Lord of Glory, thundering."

Then she said, "The Bible is the only book that reaches up to the tinies in which we live. It

speaks knowingly of the sun, the skies, the sea, and the beauty of distant stars. . . . There are no differences in men. Differences are only as the variation in shadows cast by the sun."

After lunch we rode down town in a Broadway bus to the Grand Central Station. Helen likes to feel the crowd around her. Suddenly she said, "There is a painter in the bus." I looked around and, sure enough, there was a house painter sitting in a corner at the other end of the bus, twenty feet away.

July 1946

Dinner at Helen's. She is ready for any adventure. We talked about the gypsies and Conrad Bercovici, and I told her how Bercovici had taken me through the East Side one night where the gypsies were camping out in the cellars of old warehouses. Obliged to come into the city so that their children could go to school, they lived in these abandoned cellars just as they lived on the road in summer. They even set up tents and built campfires on the concrete floors, while their young women told fortunes on the streets.

In Polly's hand Helen's fingers rippled with excitement. She asked me to remind Bercovici of his promise to take her though the East Side and show her the gypsies.

October 1949

Helen comes to dinner. . . . One of our friends asked Helen how she had come to understand abstractions. She said she had found that good apples were sweet and that there were also bad apples that were bitter. Then she learned to think of the sweetness and bitterness apart from the apples. She grasped the idea of sweetness and bitterness in themselves. Sir Alfred Zimmern, at dinner with us, my friend since the days when he wrote *The Greek Commonwealth* forty years ago, listening to Helen, exclaimed, "She is exactly following the method of Plato's dialogues." And indeed her words and their rhythm were Platonic.

The fact is that Helen has a philosophic mind. She relates in her little book *My Religion* how, when she was twelve or so, she suddenly said to her teacher, "I have been in Athens." She meant, of course, in imagination, for she had been reading about Greece, but observe what followed in her thinking. She instantly perceived that the "realness" of her mind was independent of conditions of place and body, that she had vividly seen and felt a place thousands of miles away precisely because she had a mind. How else could one explain this being "in Athens"? From that moment, she continued, "Deafness and blindness were of no real account. They were to be relegated to the outer circle of my life."

Is not that real philosophy, the life of reason?

HELEN KELLER

Christmas 1951

Helen has a way of bursting out with the most surprising remarks at table. Today she was full of Thucydides and the Peloponnesian war, about which she had been reading this Christmas morning. "What a stupid war!—the stupidest war in history," she said, shaking her head in mournful disapproval. She had been brooding and grieving over this war, which destroyed the democracy of Athens. For the rest, she was sure there was nothing about war that Thucydides did not know.

The other day she burst out about a certain Evelyn Cheesman, an English entomologist who had written wonderful things, she said, about insects. Helen had read her in one of the Braille magazines, no doubt—whether English, American, French, or German, for Helen reads them all.

Polly took her up. "What's this, Helen? Who is this Evelyn Cheesman?" Polly likes to tease her, and she is sometimes severe with her. For instance, if Helen makes a mistake in typewriting one of her letters Polly makes her copy the page again. (Usually Helen's typing is like an expert stenographer's, but the other day there were a few dim lines in one of her letters and she added this postscript: "Polly says the writing of this machine doesn't please her critical eye. My apologies. H.K.")

To return to the lady entomologist, Helen is charmingly eager about these shining new bits of knowledge. She has the earnest innocence of a ten-year-old child. Often, on the other hand, she speaks like an oracle, or, as one might say, an Asiatic sage. In spite of her incessant work, much of her life is still spent in solitary meditation, alone in the dark with her own thoughts, or with the Bible or the classics; and, as she lives in her way as the old prophets lived in the desert, many of her words inspire a kind of reverential wonder. She naturally uses archaic and poetic expressions of the sort that children pick up in their reading, words that are seldom heard in the ordinary talk that she only hears when the ever-alert Polly passes it on to her.

(I must add, what all their friends know, that Polly is in her way as extraordinary a person as Helen. Without her vitality and her diplomatic sense what could Helen do in her journeys about the world? And what inexhaustible buoyancy both of them have! I have seen them together on a midnight train, when everyone else was asleep, smiling and chatting like birds on a branch in the morning.)

June 1953

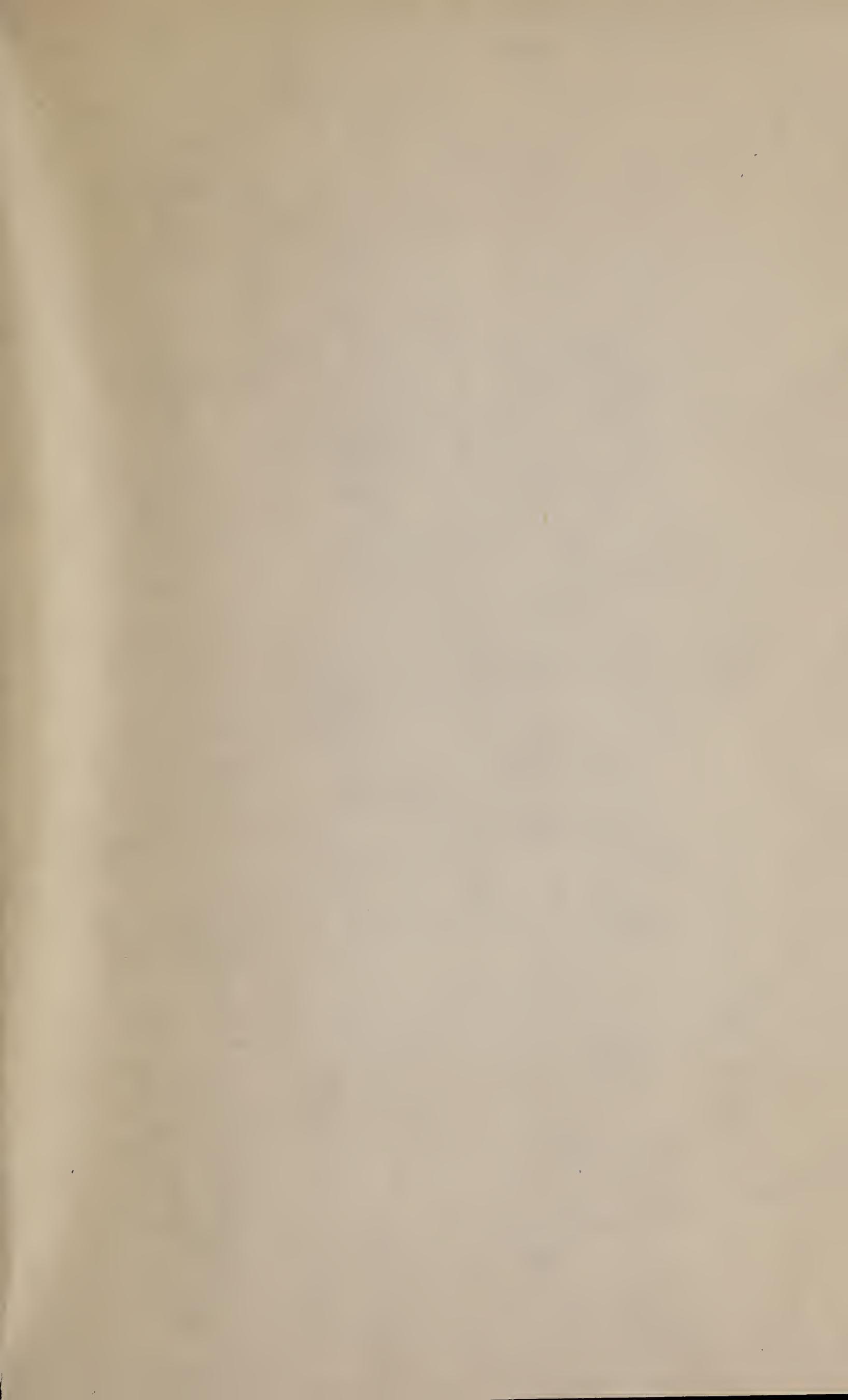
Helen is seventy-three years old today. She

lives much in eternity and much in history, but she only lives in time when she is able to keep up with the news. This week she returned from a two-months' absence in South America, and she has not had a moment yet to catch up with the newspapers and magazines. Unable to talk politics, she talks at table about Pepys's Diary, which our host Stuart Grummon is reading. She fishes up two or three facts about Pepys that I had forgotten or never knew, remembered from her own reading twenty years ago.

What variety there is in her mind! She is interested in everything. One day she recalled to me the dancing of La Argentina, though how she conceived of this so well I cannot imagine. Another day she quoted at length from a poem by Robinson Jeffers, who once told me he had seen Helen's name in the register of a hotel in the Orkney Islands. And what happy phrases come to her mind. Some children spelled words into her hand and she said their small fingers were like "the wild flowers of conversation."

ABOUT Helen Keller, it seems to me, William James uttered the last word when he wrote, "The sum of it is that you are a *blessing*"; a verdict that has been ratified in hundreds of hospitals throughout the world where she has all but raised the dead. Some day the story will be told of the miracles she has performed, or what would have passed for miracles in less case-hardened ages, when the blind have opened inward eyes and really seen life for the first time after Helen Keller has walked and talked with them.

How many, meanwhile, may have thought of her while reading the colonel's soliloquy at the end of Arthur Koestler's *The Age of Longing*, observing that American women are all too busy "playing bridge" to be "cut out for the part of martyrs and saints. . . . American womanhood," the colonel went on, "has produced no Maid of Orleans, no Rosa Luxembourgs or Madame Curies, no Brontës or Florence Nightingales or Krupskayas," and one might add that it seldom produces anyone as rash as various people who generalize about it. For how many types there are in our teeming population! One might easily suggest a list to set beside the list this fictional colonel has drawn from three or four countries. The names of Jane Addams and Emily Dickinson would appear somewhere on such a list, and I dare say that for not a few the name of Helen Keller would figure as leading all the rest.



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